Dukkha - The Buddha Grounds His Teaching on This Word

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 14:59

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and Fully Self-Awakened One.

This evening I thought we'd get back to basics a little bit and just look at this word dukkha.

The first thing is just to catch a little bit of the etymology. According to Winthrop Sargeant, the ancient Aryans who brought the Sanskrit language to India were a nomadic horse and cattle breeding people who travelled in horse and ox drawn vehicles. Su and du are prefixes indicating good and bad. The word kha in later Sanskrit comes to mean sky, ether, or space, but was originally just a hole, particularly of an axle. So sukha meant having a good axle hole, and dukkha meant having a poor one. That gives you some indication as to its roots.

Before we go into dukkha and its crucial place in the Buddhist teachings, just as a general understanding about isms and religions: all the Abrahamic religions have a God, a supernatural being who punishes you if you do something wrong and gives you lots of ice cream if you do something right. This sort of God, as you know, has created enormous problems for Western civilization, depending on which side God was on.

The East is different. There's no such personal God in Hinduism, and all that around good and bad moral behavior is taken care of by the law of karma, as it is in Buddhism and Jainism. Hinduism came to teach more of Brahman, who was an impersonal God. But in terms of the other main religions—Taoism, Jainism, and Buddhism—there is simply no God. They are non-theistic.

The Buddha, then, like these other two religions, Jainism and Taoism—it all depends on the individual human being. We create our own worlds. We have to get out of the mess. And once we're out of the mess, we are in a state of purity and happiness.

Now, that word dukkha has such a wide meaning that no one English word can do it. It was originally translated as suffering, but that's far too heavy, you might say. Then unsatisfactoriness, and even stress, for those of you who know the work of Ajahn Thanissaro.

Just as these religions have a grounding in a supernatural being which cannot be proven—although they say it can be—you'll also find that in the humanistic religions or secular religions of liberalism, communism, national socialism in its worst form Nazism, and now a tweaked form of liberalism as

neoliberalism—all of these have a premise. We know, for instance, in neoliberalism everything is to be controlled and guided by the market; governments and unions all have to get out of the way, the market knows best. And we all know where that's taken us.

Once a premise is proven to be untrue or leading to disaster, then the whole fabric, the whole architecture of that belief disappears.

So the Buddha grounds himself on something which simply cannot be denied: dukkha. The first discourse is around this word dukkha, and this is what he says at the beginning of it:

"There are two extremes that should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness." We can take homelessness to mean anybody on the spiritual path. "What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these two extremes, the Tathāgata"—that's what he called himself; it translates badly as "thus gone," but basically means the transcendent one—"has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna."

The first extreme is about indulgence, which is desire and attachment. The second is really blaming the body for all the desires we have. If I didn't have a tongue, if I didn't have the sense of taste, I'd have no problem with food. That's a mistake perhaps made by the Jains, who felt that the body itself, the material of the body, was the karmic result of bad actions.

In that discourse, he delineates the truth. He first of all states clearly that there is the truth of dukkha—we'll come to exactly how he defines that later. Then he points to the second, which is the cause of dukkha, which of course lies in that craving. The third is the cessation of dukkha. Dukkha is completely overcome by letting go of that craving and attachment. And then there's the path leading to the cessation of dukkha, the Eightfold Path.

He goes on to say what we should do about this dukkha. "This is the noble truth of dukkha. The noble truth of dukkha is to be fully understood." Then he says, "The noble truth of dukkha has been fully understood"—so he's talking about himself now.

Then he talks about the origin of dukkha: "The noble truth of the origin of dukkha is to be abandoned." That cause of dukkha is eventually to be abandoned. And he states of himself, "The origin of dukkha has been abandoned."

In the third, he says there is a noble truth of the cessation, the complete eradication of dukkha. "The noble truth of the cessation of dukkha is to be realized."

This is something to be personally experienced—the liberation from suffering. And the noble truth of the cessation of dukkha has been realized by himself.

This discourse was given to his five companions. Remember, he had left them. He had then gone on his own and finally found enlightenment, or became, shall we say, awakened. And when he came back, this is the talk that he gave to them. This is, of course, a formalized talk, but it gives us some idea of what that original conversation was about.

"This is what the Blessed One said." And being pleased, the group of five delighted in the Blessed One's statement. And while this discourse was being spoken, there arose in the Venerable Kondañña the dust-free, stainless vision of the Dhamma: "Whatever is subject to arising is all subject to ceasing."

Then the Buddha expressed this heartfelt sentiment: "Kondañña has really understood! Kondañña has really understood!" And that is how Venerable Kondañña became known as "Kondañña Who Understands," or Añña Kondañña.

So that is the first definition of dukkha. Dukkha later becomes slightly more refined in the sense of being one of the three characteristics of existence. And these are what we investigate in our vipassana practice: anicca, the quality of impermanence. Knowing impermanence, seeing impermanence, begins to reveal why holding on to anything pleasant leads to suffering, because everything, of course, disappears. Impermanence also leads us to understand anatta, not-self, because the self is supposed to be eternal, immortal.

Now we come to the core aspects of dukkha, and this is the most general explanation the Buddha gives.

First, there is ordinary suffering—dukkha-dukkha. That first dukkha refers to all the natural suffering and displeasure that we experience in life. The dukkha that we can be freed from is our relationship of wanting and not wanting. Reactivity. All our reactions based upon the idea of a self seeking to make this world a pleasant place for itself, always manipulating the world to create comfort, wanting and not wanting. That is the first form of dukkha.

The next form is caused by change—viparinama-dukkha. Even pleasant experiences are to be recognized as impermanent, and it is foolish to cling to them. When we have a wonderful party, we always want another one just like it. And of course, it never turns out the way we hoped.

Finally, there is the suffering due to conditionality—sankhara-dukkha. Sankhara refers to conditionality, but it also speaks to compoundedness. Everything is made up of bits and pieces that constitute an object, or rather, that the human mind perceives as an object. We experience ourselves as whole, complete, entire. And yet when we actually investigate ourselves, we find we are just a mass of cells, or chemically speaking, just chemicals, or at the deepest level, just subatomic energy. And the mind is simply this constant flow of thinking, imagining, emotions arising and passing.

This means that this body, this self, does not have a permanent essence. That is the important thing. Not seeing this leads us into delusion, which is the fundamental cause of our suffering.

Finally, the Buddha sums it all up. This is his definition of dukkha:

"Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, illness is dukkha, and death is dukkha. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are dukkha. Association with the unloved is dukkha. Separation from the loved is dukkha. Not getting what one wants is dukkha. In conclusion, the five clinging aggregates—the khandhas—are dukkha."

That final sentence speaks of the clinging aggregates. Remember, these are the body itself, all our feelings both physical and emotional, all our perceptions, and then the sankharas. This is where we come in, because through acts of will, we have created these volitional conditionings, these habits, which are both conditioned and conditioning. And our task as meditators is

is to perceive this whole process of how we create suffering. And it is perceiving the process that is the process of liberation.

The final khandha, by the way, is consciousness.

I can only hope that this little talk on dukkha will be of some benefit, and that you will, by your personal and complete devotion to the practice, liberate yourself from all suffering—sooner rather than later.

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